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The Damned
Thing
and other tales

AMBROSE BIERCE

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Easy To Read Series Vol. 3

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Bierce, Ambrose Gwinnett, 1842–1914

Bierce: Easy To Read / Ambrose Bierce

Completely revised and abridged text.

1. FICTION / Horror

2. LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Reading Skills

3. STUDY AIDS / English Proficiency

ISBN: 978-91-88895-04-2

Cover Design and Layout: Ark Tundra

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The Damned Thing

I

By the light of a candle, which had been placed on one end of a table, a man was reading something written in a book. It was an old account book, and the writing was not very readable, for the man held it to the candle to get a better light on it. The shadow of the book would then darken a number of faces and figures; for besides the reader, eight other men were in the room. Seven of them sat silent against the walls, not very far from the table. The room was so small that by extending an arm any one of them could have touched the eighth man, who was laying on the table. He was partly covered by a sheet, and his arms were at his sides. He was dead.

No one spoke, and the man with the book was not reading out loud. All seemed to be waiting for something to happen; the dead man was the only one who did not expect anything. It was dark outside, and from out there all the noises of the night came in through a small window—the long howl of a coyote, the buzzing of insects, cries of owls; the drone of beetles, and all the

other sounds. But no one in the company paid any attention to that; they were not very interested in matters that had no practical importance—it was obvious in every line of their faces. They were local men; farmers and woodworkers.

Only the man who was reading seemed to be different than the rest. One would have said that he looked worldly, but his clothing showed that he was from around the area.

His coat would hardly have met approval in a city, and his shoes were not the kind that one would see in a city either. His face was rather pleasing, with a slight hint of strictness. He looked like a person who was in authority. In fact, he was a coroner. It was in this capacity that he had the book, in which he was reading. It had been found among the dead man's possessions—in his cabin, where the investigation was now taking place.

When the coroner had finished reading he put the book into his breast pocket. At that moment the door opened and a young man entered. He, clearly, was not from the area: he was dressed as a man who dwelled in cities. His clothing was dusty, however, as from travel. He had, in fact, been riding hard to attend the investigation.

The coroner nodded, but no one else greeted him.

"We have waited for you," the coroner said.
 "It is necessary to finish this business tonight."

The young man smiled. "I am sorry to have kept you," he said. "I went away, not to avoid your calls, but to tell my newspaper what I am covering."

The coroner smiled.

"What you told your newspaper," he said, "is probably very different from what you will tell here under oath."

"That," replied the other, with obvious anxiety, "is as you choose. It was not written as news, because it is too incredible, but as fiction. It may pass as part of my testimony under oath."

"But you say it is incredible."

"That is nothing to you, sir, if I also swear that it is true."

The coroner was obviously not affected by the young man's anger. He was silent for a moment, and looked at the floor. The other men talked in whispers, but kept looking at the face of the corpse.

Soon the coroner lifted his eyes and said: "We will resume the investigation." The men removed their hats. The witness was sworn.

"What is your name?" the coroner asked.

"William Harker."

"Age?"

"Twenty-seven."

"You knew the deceased, Hugh Morgan?"

"Yes."

"You were with him when he died?"

"Near him."

"How did that happen—why were you present, I mean?"

"I was visiting him at his place to hunt and fish. But I was also going to study him and his solitary way of life. He seemed to be a good model for a character in fiction. I sometimes write stories."

"I sometimes read them."

"Thank you."

"Stories in general—not yours."

Some of the judges laughed. In such a dark environment humor shows high spirits. In between battles soldiers laugh easily, and a joke in the death chamber conquers by surprise.

"Tell the circumstances of this man's death," said the coroner. "You may use any notes that you please."

The witness understood and pulled up a manuscript from his breast pocket. He held it near the candle and began to read.

II

"It was still dark in the morning when we left the house. We were looking for quail, but we had only one dog. Morgan said that our best hunting ground was beyond a certain area that he pointed out. On the other side the ground was quite level and covered with wild oats.

"As we emerged from the forest, Morgan was just a few yards ahead of me. Suddenly, we heard a noise as of some animal beating around the bushes, which we could see were agitated.

"'We've started a deer,' I said. 'I wish we had brought a rifle.'

"Morgan said nothing as he closely watched the agitated forest. He had cocked both barrels of his gun, and was holding it, ready to fire. I thought he was a little excited, which surprised me, for he had a reputation of being unusually calm, even in moments of imminent danger.

"'Oh, come on!' I said. 'You are not going to kill a deer with quail-shot, are you?'

"He did not answer. I was struck by how pale his face was all of a sudden. Then I understood that we had serious business on hand, and my first guess was that we had 'jumped' a bear. I went to Morgan's side, and cocked my gun as I moved.

"The bushes were now quiet, and the sounds had stopped, but Morgan was as alert as before.

"'What is it? What the heck is it?' I asked.

"That Damned Thing!" he replied, without turning his head. His voice was dry and unusual. He was trembling.

"I was about to say something, when I saw the wild oats near the place of the noise move. I can hardly describe it. It seemed as if it was moved by a wind, which not only bent it but pressed it down—crushed it so that it did not rise, and this movement was slowly coming toward us.

"Nothing that I had ever seen before had moved me so strangely as this miracle, but I did not feel any fear. I remember that once, as I looked out a window, I for a moment mistook a small tree for one of a group of larger trees farther away.

"It was about the same size as the others, but it seemed out of harmony with them, because of its shape. It was just a visual illusion but it alarmed me. We are so dependent on the well-ordered operation of the natural laws, that when they even deviate slightly from what we expect, we fear for our safety.

"So now the movement that did not seem to have a cause, and the slow approach of it toward us was unsettling. My companion was actually frightened, and I could not believe it when he suddenly threw his gun to his shoulder and fired both barrels at the grass!

"Before the gun smoke had cleared away, I heard a loud cry—like that of a wild animal—and, throwing his gun to the ground, Morgan ran away from the spot. At the same time I was violently thrown to the ground by the impact of something I could not see in the smoke—a soft, heavy something that hit me with great force.

"Before I could get back on my feet and get my gun, I heard Morgan cry out as if in mortal agony. I heard such savage sounds as one hears from fighting dogs. Terrified, I struggled to my feet and looked in the direction of Morgan's flight—may heaven in mercy spare me from another sight like that!

"Less than thirty yards away was my friend, down on one knee, his head thrown back, his long hair in disorder, and his body in violent movement from side to side.

"His right arm was lifted and the hand seemed to be missing—at least I could not see it. The other arm was invisible. At times, I could see only a part of his body; it was as if he had been partly blotted out—there is no other way of putting it—then a shift of his position would bring it all into view again.

"All this occurred within only a few seconds, but in that time Morgan looked like a wrestler beaten by

superior weight and strength. I only ever saw him, and not always distinctly.

"During the entire incident his shouts were heard, as if through a barrage of sounds of rage as I had never heard from a man or brute!

"For a moment I could not move. Then I threw down my gun and ran to my friend's help. I had a vague belief that he was suffering from a fit or some form of convulsion. Before I could reach him, he was down and quiet. All sounds had stopped, but now I saw the same strange movement of the wild oats moving from the trampled area toward the forest. It was only when it had reached the wood that I could withdraw my eyes and look at my friend. He was dead."

III

The coroner rose from his seat and stood beside the dead man. He pulled away the sheet and exposed the entire naked body. It was yellowish, but had bluish-black marks, obviously caused by bruises. The chest and sides looked as if they had been beaten with a club. There were cuts; the skin was torn in strips and shreds.

Moving to the end of the table, the coroner untied a handkerchief that had been tied around the head. When it was drawn away it exposed what had been the throat.

Some of the jurors who had risen to get a better look turned their faces away in shock. Witness Harker leaned out of the open window, faint and sick.

As he dropped the handkerchief upon the dead man's neck, the coroner fetched one garment after another from a pile of clothing. He held each up for inspection. All were torn, and stiff with blood. The jurors did not take a closer look.

They seemed rather uninterested. Actually they had seen all this before; the only thing that was new to them was Harker's testimony.

"Gentlemen," the coroner said, "we have no more evidence, I think. Your duty has already been explained to you. If there is nothing you wish to ask, you may go outside and consider your verdict."

The foreman rose—a tall, bearded man of sixty.

"I would like to ask one question, Mr. Coroner," he said. "What mental asylum did your last witness escape from?"

"Mr. Harker," said the coroner, calmly, "from what mental asylum did you last escape?"

Harker's face turned red again, but he said nothing, and the seven jurors rose and left the cabin.

"If you are done insulting me, sir," said Harker, as soon as he and the coroner were alone with the dead man, "I suppose I am free to go?"

"Yes."

Harker was about to leave, but paused, with his hand on the door latch. The habit of his profession was strong in him—stronger than his self-respect.

He turned around and said:

"The book that you have there—I recognize it as Morgan's diary. You seem quite interested in it; you did read in it as I was testifying. May I see it? The public would like—"

"The book does not matter," replied the coroner and slipped it into his coat pocket; "all the entries in it were made before the writer's death."